

Key Issues in Gaelic Affairs in Scotland: A statement to the Council of Europe 6th ECRML monitoring visit to the UK – London, Friday 23 February 2024

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Recognition of achievements

In any assessment or monitoring process of civic engagements with minority languages it is important to acknowledge achievements and to recognise the sincere contributions of a multitude of people in achieving progress in the realms of education, media, youth supports, cultural promotion and the civic visibility of minoritized and highly subordinated languages, such as Scottish Gaelic.

Monitoring processes

However, for monitoring processes to have credibility, the **Council of Europe's assessment**¹ should be rooted in a realistic appraisal of the main challenges faced by the speaker group. In the case of the presented **documentation on the state of Scottish Gaelic**¹ prepared according to the procedures of **European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages**², it is hard to recognise the day-to-day real-world struggles of being a Scottish Gaelic speaker. To this extent, it is hard to see how this monitoring documentation reflects the contemporary social reality of Scottish Gaelic in Scotland today. We realise, of course, that Council of Europe reporting follows a set of criteria based on formal agreements concerning the implementation of sections of the Charter's suggested institutional commitments. However, the report as it stands indicates that official provision in these formal sectors is divorced from the reality of the critical vulnerability of the societal condition of the language.

Agreed misleading narrative

One gets the impression from reading these **reports**¹ that Gaelic promotion is thriving except for the need for more educational initiatives to increase the numbers of qualified GME teachers, for more educational resources and curricular innovation and for greater levels of media production. The difficulty in the narrative which has been prepared by the Council in consultation with official bodies in Scotland is that it completely ignores the **documented evidence**³ that the remaining vernacular Gaelic communities are at the point of societal collapse. The messaging coming from the Council of Europe in this regard is that the formal aspects of official Gaelic promotion in Scotland are successfully fulfilling their agreed remit with the Council under the auspices of the European Charter. Unfortunately, the imminent collapse of the last remaining Gaelic-speaking communities, mostly in the islands, seems to be an inconvenient fact of life which official bodies and their assessors feel is not relevant to their deliberations. In this regard, one can only conclude that the

¹ Evaluation by the Committee of Experts of the Implementation of the Recommendations for Immediate Action contained in the Committee of Experts' fifth evaluation report on the UNITED KINGDOM and ISLE OF MAN. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 22 March 2021.

European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. Sixth periodical report presented to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in accordance with Article 15 of the Charter for United Kingdom. Strasbourg, 3 August 2023

² The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML): <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages/text-of-the-charter>

³ Ó Giollagáin, C., Camshron, G., Moireach, P., Ó Curnáin, B., Caimbeul, I., MacDonald, B. and Péterváry, T. (2020). *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community: A comprehensive sociolinguistic survey of Scottish Gaelic* (GCVC). Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press.

Council of Europe's Committee of Experts are willing to sign off on the robust health of Gaelic promotion while the language community is dying.

In essence, the reports¹ are bedevilled by a cavalier attitude of 'carry on regardless' despite the weak traction of officially sponsored Gaelic initiatives to positively affect obvious social challenges.

Reputational damage

We are of the opinion that sanctioning such reports¹ as they stand or ushering similar reports through the monitoring process poses possible reputational damage to the Council of Europe's minority-language assessment process, and perhaps could bring the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages into disrepute by its seemingly cosy, uncritical relationship with Gaelic official bodies to the near complete neglect of societal context. Obviously, officially sponsored minority-language promotion will always be successful if it never has to contend with the messy reality of the language group's social existence and collective sustainability.

The reports¹ presented by Committee of Experts are a salutary example of institutional aspirations hitting a brick wall. We could argue that this collision was inevitable in the case of highly endangered languages, such as Scottish Gaelic, given the original analytical limitations of the aims of the Charter² and the socially dissociated reporting processes which have been conducted in relation to Scottish Gaelic. Are we to conclude that the Council of Europe is quietly acquiescing in an undeclared assumption that the problems of the Gaelic communities are now so intractable that Gaelic is to be consigned to a half-life of its practice in institutional settings? In this regard, the proponents of the European Charter are risking setting a dangerous precedent for minority-language policy of selecting for a language-in-institutions approach to the disregard of the more fruitful language-in-society promotion and protection of minority languages. Arguably, there is some justification in the contention that the Charter itself could be interpreted as being implicated in the neglect of the demolingistic decline of Europe's ethnolinguistic minorities. The Charter's focus on identifying initiatives to fulfil the assessment requirements in certain sectors, such as education, the media and arts, academia and the civic symbolic profile of minority languages, has engendered an illusory sense of security in minority-language official bodies which can be at odds with the societal crisis many minority-language speakers encounter.

In the case of the European Charter's monitoring of the situation of Scottish Gaelic, it is important that the assessment is not interpreted as: 'Gaelic policy is fine; it is a pity that the language community is dying!'

Admitting reality

There is a sense of unreality in how the present dispensation and policy framework address the societal challenges and vulnerability of Gaelic speakers, especially in the social geography of the vernacular speakers of Gaelic in the islands.

We believe that the only way to avoid tarnishing the Charter process is to go back to the drawing board and start from a clear admission of the societal vulnerability of the Gaelic speaker communities and then enquire of the official bodies how they intend to interact in society and help the people with this challenging reality under the various sectoral headings covered by the Charter.

General Observations about Gaelic Public Affairs in Scotland

We wish also to make these general observations to the Council of Europe about how public policy is currently formulated and conducted in Scotland:

The need to face social reality of Gaelic-speaking Communities

- Gaelic public affairs in Scotland conform to a syndrome which could be depicted as Language Promotion without sufficient Language Community Protection; this entails a focus on broad-spectrum language revitalisation in the context of vernacular speaker group decline (i.e. policy ignores the decline)

There is a lack of concern for real-world issues in how the present dispensation and policy framework addresses the societal challenges and vulnerability of Gaelic speakers, especially in the social geography of the vernacular speakers of Gaelic in the islands.

The policy approach should be based on an accurate analysis or diagnosis of the challenges

- There are obvious challenges in integrating credible Minority Language Social Diagnostics into the policy framework, whereby prescriptions for minority language revitalisation are not sufficiently rooted in a diagnosis of the minorities' societal requirements.

The naivety in current policy assumptions that the promotion of Gaelic affairs through bureaucratic (and largely aspirational) institutional language plans is sufficient to address the disempowerment of the Gaelic communities.

The constraints of the Legislative Framework for Gaelic Affairs in Scotland

- There is a problem with a lack of specificity in differentiating the various needs of different Gaelic-speaking social categories, L1, L2 and learners. This is a major constraint on the efficacy of Gaelic LPP in Scotland.

No credible policy analysis has been carried out to date on the strategic impacts of the various policy initiatives emanating from the Gaelic legislative framework.

Relatedly, no serious consideration has been afforded to the gap between the level of aspiration in corporate approach of Bòrd na Gàidhlig and actual outcomes in Gaelic communities. It would be advisable to consider in this context whether Bòrd na Gàidhlig is under-engineered for the level of aspiration and expectation entailed in Gaelic revitalisation, i.e. they are expected to perform miracles with limited powers, resources and finance.

Promotion within sectors does not amount to Community Empowerment

- Current policy emphasises Individualism and Sectoralism in LPP (Language Policy and Planning), whereby individuals may benefit from the take up of opportunity or advantage from official provision in the context of a weakened collective; the promotion of language issues through key sectors, and the symbolic use of Gaelic in public administration in the context of underdeveloped social empowerment measures does not form the basis to a coherent policy to address societal concerns.

The policy can create sectoral successes with only marginal societal benefits and advantages.

There is a controlling aspect to Gaelic LPP which seeks to defend sectoral advantage and disregard societal problems

- This controlling aspect in Gaelic public affairs has contributed to Ascendancy Thinking in LPP, entailing the tendency among power brokers in institutional ascendancy to monopolise attention and resources for particular sectoral interests.

The degree of control by official bodies over Gaelic affairs which is restricting the free exchange of ideas and perspectives to the extent that certain participants are overly anxious about expressing ideas publicly for fear of falling out of favour with budget holders.

The need for open debate and the free-flow and engage of ideas

- Policy should enhance complementarity between different categories of speakers and learners and how they benefit from sectoral provision.

There is a need to increase a sense of inclusivity among different participants in Gaelic policy developments and to account for the requirements of vernacular speakers, 2nd language speakers; L2 networks and learners in an integrated manner. Many in the vernacular community feel excluded for official debates and initiatives.